CHAPTER 4

Vandalism, Ignorance, Scholarship, Museums

Heritage and Destruction

Nous avons beau nous enorgueillir, et nous défendre contre les périls qui assiégeront le Bas-Empire, par le spectacle des belles formes de notre liberté moderne. Hélas! cette liberté elle-même, universelle, indéfinie, sans nom et sans aîeux, mal comprise, plus mal pratiquée, sans souvenirs et sans point d’appui, quelles racines a-t-elle dans nos esprits, dans nos mœurs?… Comment veut-on que le travail de nivellement, qui use et décompose notre pays depuis tant de siècles, laisse encore comprendre ce qu’il y avait de fort et de beau dans les diverses institutions qui couvraient autrefois notre territoire?… L’esprit des masses est séparé par mille siècles de nos souvenirs nationaux.[1] [1845]

In the above quotation Lorain is writing about the destruction of the Abbey of Cluny, but he makes it clear that his condemnation is general, and that Cluny is but one manifestation of the broad disease, with symptoms including “modern liberty” on top of centuries of destruction, accepted by a population most of which is indifferent to any sense of national memory. Is it possible that such sentiments were rooted in the anti-republican and anti-modernist ideology on the right wing of politics?

It was indeed a minority of cognoscenti who appreciated the remains of the past. Protesting against the demolition of the late antique walls of modernising and expanding towns was generally a non-starter, because the preponderance of public opinion was strongly in favour of opening up towns, rationalising their layout, and improving their services. Of course, nobody (except the Army) could argue that more-than-millennial walls continued to be of any use. Any scholars wishing to study the contents of such walls were nearly always short of funds and manpower for digging – and dismantling often required specialised equipment, always assuming they could sort out the legal ownership of the walls and their adjacent structures. The solution was to complain long and hard about the vandalism of unfeeling municipal administrations which did the actual hard work – and then reap the benefits deriving from the uncovered antiquities.
Vandalism

On seeing sculptures decorating a house at Le Mans being sawed up, the man was asked: “Mais vous êtes donc un Vandale?” Celui-ci, sans comprendre, lui répondit tranquillement: “Non, Monsieur, je suis épicier à Mayenne.”[2] [exchange c. 1830]

References to vandalism (the perpetual cry of the antiquarians against the modernists, and effortlessly linked with restoration)[3] occur throughout this book, because the old is frequently compared with the new, the relative honours depending on the point of view, and destruction being perennial.1 The topic also made good newspaper and journal copy, with plentiful space dedicated year after year to the latest outrages.[4] Caumont was one of the first to recognise, in 1834, that the problem was so large it needed the whole population to take a hand in preventing it.[5]

Much went during the Revolution, in senseless acts of anti-monarchical fervour which “ont privé le pays d’une foule de titres précieux et de monuments qui attestaient son amour des arts et le recommandaient à l’attention des étrangers.”[6] At Rouen, Hughes complained in 1803 that “while churches and convents of superlative elegance and beauty have been destroyed with vandal wantonness, whatever was cumbersome, awkward, ugly, has been preserved with a sort of pious care.”[7] Not so antiquities: at Sens in 1837, bas-reliefs retrieved from the walls and stored on the promenade (there was no museum) were re-cut for new building work, and few were saved.[8] At the end of the century, something similar happened at Algiers – but this time with material extracted from the town’s museum.[9] In 1844, a priest from the Besançon diocese catalogued “plusieurs actes récents de vandalisme et contre certains projets de restauration dont on menace nos plus remarquables et nos plus chers monuments.”[10] At Château-Thierry in 1847, a correspondent felt himself surrounded by vandals, preaching in the desert, while the very monuments “tremblent à l’approche de ces destructeurs; ils sont l’effroi des souvenirs historiques.”[11] Unsightly construction was as bad as destruction and, asked one outraged observer at the Hôpital de Beaune in 1852, “Voilà pour quelles futilités on autorise des additions déplorables! Que font donc les commissions archéologiques!!!!”[12]

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1 Léon 1951, 255–306 for cultural vandalism, including reuse for barracks, prisons, administration.